
A History of Tishah B'Av

Gershon Schwartz, z"l

We Jews have survived for so long to a large degree because of our ability to remember. We remember the good—the Exodus, the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the conquest of the land of Israel. And we remember the bad—the destruction of two Temples, the exile from the land, persecutions throughout the ages. We have thrived despite these tragedies because of the promise that God has not forgotten us, that just as we remember, God remembers. God remembers our special status as a people, our covenant, and the divine promise to redeem us and to bring us to the land of Israel. As we say in the Pesah *haggadah*, it is that promise that has stood by our ancestors and us. Many have sought to destroy us, but the Holy One has rescued us from their hands.

Tishah B'Av recalls the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem. We remember the suffering of past generations—God's decree against the Israelites in the wilderness, the fall of Betar, the expulsion from Spain—all of which have been assigned by tradition to one date: 9 Av. Perhaps we find comfort that past generations of Jews were reassured by that promise and were comforted by that hope: God will rescue us; God will remember the covenant. God will punish our enemies and restore our fortunes.

Jews have suffered tragedies in every era. Whether it was destruction of a holy site like the Temple in Jerusalem, exile from a city or country, or a pogrom, Jews in virtually every place and every age have seen at least some suffering. These disasters so color our view of Jewish history that modern historians like the great Salo W. Baron have warned against a “lachrymose view of Jewish history,” where we see the Jewish past as merely a long collection of tragedies and woes. Thus, the term “dark ages” has been transplanted by the “Middle Ages,” a time during which Jewish creativity and self-autonomy were periodically disrupted by pogroms and expulsion.

If we look further back in Jewish history, much the same is true of the rabbinic period, from about the first century B.C.E. until approximately the seventh century C.E. This period saw the destruction of the Second Temple, the end to Jewish autonomy in the land of Israel, as well as numerous other national and local disasters. At the same time, Judaism also flourished through these centuries. The

Mishnah and two great Talmuds were written and edited. The Midrash literature was created and compiled. Judaism expanded in its size, scope and thinking.

During this period, the Rabbis of the Talmud assigned to Tishah B'Av, the ninth day of the fifth month, five great tragedies from Jewish history. The Rabbis found both a theological rationale and a sense of comfort that these disasters all happened on the same day: The rationale answered the question why the Second Temple was destroyed on the anniversary of the destruction of the First Temple: "Disasters happen on a disastrous day." This theme—that certain days are "days of disaster" (what we would likely call "bad luck days")—recurs throughout Jewish history. A host of other calamities are assigned to Tishah B'Av. The Mishnah of Ta'anit (4:6; cited as 4:4 in some editions), lists five specific misfortunes that befell the Jewish people on this day:

On the ninth of Av, it was decreed against our ancestors that they should not enter the land, the First and Second Temples were destroyed, Betar was captured, and the city was ploughed over. When Av begins, our joy decreases.

The Rabbis found comfort that all these tragedies occurred on one day: While we Jews had seen more than our share of sadness, we could limit it to one day—later expanded to a three-week period of national mourning—that would not affect and infect the rest of the year. Often politically weak and small in numbers, Jews could survive through the assurance that disaster was not the year-round fate of their people. Whether these tragedies actually occurred on the ninth day of the fifth month became almost irrelevant: The comfort and solace that their compartmentalization and theological rationalization brought was worth the possible historical inaccuracy.

Thus, Tishah B'Av became a national fast day recalling the calamities and misfortunes that occurred to the Jewish people throughout the ages. Jewish tradition has assigned many of these catastrophes to Tishah B'Av whether they actually occurred then or not. In the list of tragedies mentioned in the Mishnah from Ta'anit, cited above, the Rabbis saw the first tragedy, when "it was decreed against our ancestors," as God's ruling that the Israelites would not enter the land of Israel. In Numbers 13-14, Moses sent twelve spies to the land of Canaan. Ten returned with a negative report of the land, while only Joshua and Caleb returned with a positive report. God decreed that "none of the men who have seen My Presence and the signs that I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness...

shall see the land that I promised on the oath to their fathers; none of those who spurn Me shall see it” (Numbers 14:22-23).

That the book of Numbers knows of no national day of mourning on Tishah B’Av is irrelevant. The Rabbis of the Talmud calculated the days mentioned in Numbers: They determined that the night when God decreed that the Israelites would not enter the land, when “the people wept that night” (Numbers 14:2), was the ninth of Av. The Rabbis found comfort that the day of *their* disasters—the destruction of both Temples—was *already* a day of calamity for the people Israel.

From biblical accounts, it is clear that the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians took place during the summer of the year 586 B.C.E., though the Talmud itself admits that the exact dating is imprecise. The prophet Jeremiah reports that “on the tenth day of the fifth month—that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadrezzar, the king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the chief of the guard, came to represent the king of Babylon in Jerusalem. He burned the house of the Lord...” (Jeremiah 52:12-13). Another biblical book, II Kings, recalls events “on the seventh day of the fifth month (25:8).” Zechariah simply refers to “the fast of the fifth month” (8:19), without specifying the date. The Rabbis of the Talmud (Ta’anit 29a) try to reconcile this discrepancy by positing that the heathens entered the Temple on the seventh of Av, desecrated it on the seventh and eighth of Av, and set it on fire on the ninth (Tishah B’Av), whereupon it continued burning the entire day. Thus, the Temple was actually destroyed on the *tenth* of Av. The Rabbis, however, set the fast day as the ninth, using the reasoning that “the beginning of destruction is greater [and, therefore, is the appropriate time to mourn and fast].”

From these few sources, it becomes clear that the exact date of the destruction of the First Temple is debatable. Even if we accept the biblical accounts as accurate, they are contradictory. The Rabbis of the Talmudic era focused on one day, the ninth day of Av, which they determined to be *the* anniversary of the destruction of the First Temple. There were, of course, dissenters. Rabbi Yohanan remarked: “Had I been in that generation [the generation of the destruction], I would have set it [the fast day] on the tenth, because most of the Sanctuary was destroyed on it [that day].” Similarly, Flavius Josephus, a Jew with loyalties to the Romans who is one of our sources of the history of that era, wrote in his *Jewish Wars* that the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans on the tenth day of Av [*Wars* 6:249-50]. The facts really didn’t matter as much as the world view

that they represented: Rabbinic Judaism set *one day* as the national Jewish day of mourning, and that was Tishah B'Av.

It is possible that Tishah B'Av—the ninth day of the fifth month—had already become the national day of mourning even before the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. Possible proof for this may be in a remark by Rabbi Eleazar ben Zadok in the Talmud (Ta'anit 12a), where he states that his family observed the ninth of Av as a fast day in previous generations. Since Rabbi Eleazar traces his lineage back to a family mentioned in the biblical book of Ezra, perhaps, Rabbi Eleazar is hinting to Tishah B'Av as a national fast day for destruction in earlier generations.

In the Mishnah's list, the destruction of each Temple is a separate calamity, accounting for the second and third on this list. Betar, the last stronghold during the Bar Kokhba war, was captured in 135 C.E. In 136 C.E., “the city was ploughed over,” that is, Jerusalem was razed by the emperor Hadrian who established a pagan temple on the site of the Holy Temple. This site, where pagan worship took place, was called AELIA CAPITOLINA, and Jews were prohibited entry to it.

For the reasons stated above, many other sad events in Jewish history were assigned to Tishah B'Av, under the rubric “Disasters happen on a disastrous day.” Thus, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, which took place during the summer, has been determined by some to have occurred on Tishah B'Av in the year 1492. The Jews of Western Europe recall entire communities that were massacred during the Crusades in the summer, that is, “on Tishah B'Av.”

In 1648-1649, Polish Jewry was decimated by a Cossack revolt led by Bogdan Chmielnicki. The “Chmielnicki massacre” became one of the saddest events in early modern Polish Jewish history. Nathan Hanover's account of this uprising, *The Abyss of Despair*, outlines not only the history of the massacre, but, more importantly, a theology of the events, memorializing the martyrs and giving meaning to the suffering. In some communities, it became the custom to read Hanover's work on, or just prior to, Tishah B'Av. To the Jews of 17th-century Poland, the Chmielnicki massacre became their own personal Tishah B'Av. To the Jews of seventeenth-century Poland, the Chmielnicki massacre became their own personal Tishah B'Av.¹

For contemporary Jewry, Tishah B'Av has become one of the days on which the Holocaust is remembered. Many of the additional readings and poems in today's liturgy focus not on the

destruction of the Temples, centuries ago, but on the destruction of European Jewry, only decades ago. The debate still continues whether Yom Ha-Shoah, the date set aside by Israel's Knesset to commemorate the Holocaust, is necessary or adequate. After all, some argue, destruction and devastation have long been remembered on Tishah B'Av, even if there is no formal connection to the date. We have found comfort and relief in incorporating all of Jewish tragedy into one day.

And so it was with tragic events in every era, from Crusades in medieval Ashkenaz to the Holocaust in modern Europe: Every generation of Jews, it seems, has had to endure some calamity during the summer months, some misfortune "on Tishah B'Av." The Ninth of Av became a symbol for all the persecutions and misfortunes of the Jewish people. Yet, Jewish tradition has also seen Tishah B'Av as a day of potential promise and salvation: "The day the Temple was destroyed, the redeemer was born" (Yerushalmi Berakhot 2:4; Lamentations Rabbah 1:16). The Talmud relates the tale of a woman who gives birth to a child on the very day the Temple was destroyed. This child was named Menahem, "Comforter," and he will return one day to comfort the bereaved people:

Destruction, in the liturgical scheme of things, has always been paired with redemption. That is why the Rabbis instituted seven Weeks of Consolation following the Ninth of Av...²

Thus, not only did the Rabbis make Tishah B'Av into the day of national disaster. They also saw in this day the seeds of national redemption. So may it be in our day!

¹David Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p.108

²Ibid., p. 565.